

The New Hutterite Bruderhof in Germany

By Harold S. Bender (in *Christian Monitor*)

Last summer the writer had the privilege of spending a week-end visiting the new Hutterite "Bruderhof," in Middle Germany, called "Bruderhof-Neuhof," which is located at the edge of the Rhön Hills, sixty miles north-east of Frankfurt. Having been much impressed by the experience and believing that this modern revival of old-fashioned Hutterite principles would be of interest to our readers a brief account of the visit is here presented. This account will probably be of particular interest just now, since the leader of this "Bruderhof," Eberhard Arnold, is at present on a visit to the Hutterites of the United States and Canada, in the course of which he visited Scottdale, and several other Mennonite centers.

It was on one Saturday afternoon in early June that I reached the little town of Neuhof, in the district of Fulda. I did not know how to recognize the "brother" from the "Bruderhof" who was to take me to the farm of the Brotherhood, but as soon as I spied a sturdy, friendly looking man in simple, plain clothing, and with a good-sized beard, I judged at once that this must be my expected friend, and so it was. Adolf Braun, the manager of the farm, had come to meet me with team and wagon (an auto is too expensive for the Brotherhood at present), and had already made a number of Saturday purchases. We had a very pleasant drive into the "back country," up into the hills of the Rhön. The long ride gave me much opportunity to learn Adolf Braun's life story, as well as to become partly acquainted with the life on the "Bruderhof." Braun had formerly been a Baptist, but had become dissatisfied with his group after the war, partly because of their attitude on the war question, and for other reasons. He had been with the Brotherhood almost from the beginning. Through him I received a very good impression of the quality of the life on the "Bruderhof," for Adolf Braun was the soul of kindness and Christian charity, a consistent representative of the simple, plain principles of the Brotherhood.

Eberhard Arnold, the leader of the group, had been absent on business in Frankfurt, but met us as we were almost at the "Bruderhof," so that we drove the last two miles together. At last we reached the "Hof," away back in the midst of fine natural scenery, with a splendid view out over the hills, quite a distance from the nearest village and with no close neighbors. The buildings of the "Bruderhof" consists of a group of three modest houses about a central court, and a few scattered smaller buildings, workshops, and a barn. The three buildings about the central court are the living quarters, and contain also the school rooms and the common dining hall, in addition to living quarters for the families and single members of the Brotherhood.

On first sight the buildings seemed to be small for the number of people in the group, and otherwise inadequate, although very neat. The furniture was also very meager, though in good order and repair. I soon learned from Eberhard Arnold what I had suspected, that the "Bruderhof" was really living in poverty, in need, and that much as they wished they might be able to build better and larger buildings,

with better furnishings, they lacked adequate finances. They had bought the small farm with its buildings in a sadly rundown state a few years before, in 1926 I believe, and were working hard to improve the land and the buildings. They were succeeding visibly in their purpose. It was in connection with this fact of the poverty of the Brotherhood that I received one of my strongest impressions, namely the devotion of these people to their faith and their principles. Many of the members of the Brotherhood formerly had good position in the world, as school teachers, as social workers, as laborers, and otherwise, but they had surrendered everything and were willing to suffer and sacrifice and bear hardship for the sake of their cause,-- this in addition to the misunderstanding, criticism and abuse, from society in general. I do not think the friends on the "Bruderhof" will object at all to this mention of their poverty, because it is an honorable poverty, and they, least of all, are concerned with "wordly goods," since they have given up the principle of private property. However, they do have hard times, and, as Eberhard Arnold said, in the winter and spring until the new garden and farm products are available they often have but very little to eat. Yet no one complains.

But to go back to the narrative. When we arrived at the "Bruderhof" I was impressed at once by the spirit of simple brotherhood and evident love which existed. They were as one great family, from young to old. And I felt this spirit the longer I was among them. Forms and formality were done away with, "Sie" had disappeared and been replaced by the familiar "Du," even with visitor. First names were used, titles forgotten (although Eberhard Arnold is a university graduate with a Ph.D.), stiffness and all signs of vanity and pride were gone, and in their place was a simple, hearty, friendly good cheer and a spirit of true Christian charity and regard for one another. The spirit of fellowship (Gemeinschaft) is very strong in the Brotherhood, as it must be if such a group is to exist at all. Private property is abolished, and a community of goods set up in its place, where all must live and work together for the good of all. I could not help but wonder whether the possession of money and property is not after all a great enemy of Christian love and fellowship, and was reminded of the word of our Lord, "How hardly shall they that have riches enter into the kingdom."

I have already referred to my impression of the simplicity of the people and the life of the Brotherhood. This is also marked in the clothing. As I learned upon inquiry, there is no compulsion in this matter, no required forms of clothing. Nevertheless the members dress much alike, and all in very simple fashion, in plain, modest apparel. The married men wear beards, for the most part, although this is also not required. Jewelry and ornament are not seen. It was a relief to enjoy the simplicity of life, including the clothing, of these good Christian people, and get away from the fashions and pride of display in the world in general. Here again I was made to wonder how much we have become slaves of fashions and customs of clothing, to the detriment of simplicity and sincerity, and even comfort. I refer here not only to the vanity of prevailing fashions, but also to the foolish customs into which we of this age, both of men and women,

have fallen, and of which we ourselves are perhaps not conscious. I was also made to wonder why we prefer to wear only the dark and somber colors or why we prefer heavy and fine fabrics, instead of the coarser, natural fabrics.

I mention some of these points partly to indicate the strong impression made by the life of these people. Here in the "Bruderhof" they really love an unwordly life, separate from the world, a separation in comparison to which we Mennonites who emphasize unworldliness are still quite worldly. The life here was and is so different from the ordinary life, even of Mennonites, that I was forced to reconsider the life which we live, and the spirit which animates our Brotherhood. The power of the testimony of the life in the "Bruderhof" was so strong that I could not help but think along these lines, even though there was no attempt made in any way to "work" on me, or to "convert" me to the principles of the Brotherhood. Again and again the thought came to me, how many of our modern Mennonites would be willing to sacrifice as these people sacrificed, and do it with joy and unwavering faith in the truth and right of their principles?

Several meetings were held during my stay in the Bruderhof on Saturday and Sunday, one of which took the place of our regular Sunday morning service. Great emphasis is placed on singing, and the group has a hymn book of its own. Eberhard Arnold, as the leader, is the spokesman, the preacher of the group, the "Diener am Wort." After his talk in the morning service, at my request, the meeting was turned into a sort of testimony service, in which the adult members told how they came to accept the principles of the group, and what experiences had brought them to where they were. This meeting was very valuable to me as it gave me an insight into the inner forces at work in the group. The background of the different members was quite varied. All had been shaken loose from their previous life though the upheaval of the World War and the years following. Many had gone through the youth movement, seeking something better, tired of the shams and artificiality of the world, and unsatisfied with the deadness of much of the evangelical church life. One or two had been members of other religious groups outside the state church. All had come into the new movement as the result of sincere seeking after a better way of life, and all were members of the new group by deep conviction.

I was also impressed with the depth and strength of the religious life in the Brotherhood. Their whole life is a seeking to do the will of God, and to be His servants and messengers among men. Because of the reaction against the forms of the ordinary church life, they have perhaps gone too far in the abandoning of religious forms, but that does not seem to have hindered their spiritual life, and no doubt they will in time develop their own forms. The Bible as the Word of God is their only authority for faith and life. They practice adult baptism on confession of faith, and celebrate the Lord's Supper.

Lest the movement be misunderstood, I should like to emphasize the Christian and Biblical character of the group, as over against the idealistic. The Brotherhood is a Christian Communism not on the

basis of philosophical principles, nor because of their belief that Communism is the ideal world order, or because of their belief in this system as the climax of evolutionary social development, or confidence in it as a workable political system. On the contrary they do not believe in the evolution of human society and of man in general; they do not believe that communism is possible on any other basis than among Christians thoroughly obedient to the will of God. They do not believe that any great number of people in the world will ever be able to meet these conditions, and do not look for world betterment. On the contrary, they look toward the coming of the new world in the return of the Lord Jesus Christ. Their view of the world and the world system is therefore eschatological and not idealistic and evolutionary, if I may be permitted these technical terms, although it is not millenarian.

But lest this account become too long, I must go on to a description of their organization and a brief account of their history. There are many more details which I should like to relate, and other impression of my visit which would be worth while recording, but space will not permit. It should be mentioned that drinking and smoking are of course unknown, that swearing and harsh language are absent, and that labor and industry are expected of everyone. Hospitality is also strongly emphasized and freely practiced in spite of the poverty under which the group is struggling.

First, a very brief account of the origin of the group. Eberhard Arnold, who is the founder and moving force in the group, was the son of a University Professor of Theology. He had secured his own doctor's degree and was offered a professorship, and a pastorage, but preferred rather to work and preach free from obligation to the state church even as a young man. A man of gifts and leadership, he soon became known, and was for a time prominent as one of the secretaries of the German Student Y.M.C.A., and a director of the publishing activities of this organization. After the war, he was unable to continue with this organization because of his radical pacifism and his insistence on the application of the Sermon on the Mount. Refusing to compromise in any way, he and his family finally made a complete break with the organized religious forces of their day, and sought to find the will of God, and to be led to the way which was right for them in full obedience to God and His Word. For a time they were active with many others in a strongly pacifistic and semicomunistic Christian movement associated with the Youth Movement, with its center at Schluchtern, near Frankfort, and with the Press known as the "Neu Werk Verlag." Soon however they were forced to separate from this group and establish a group of their own which was more radical in its application of the principles of the Sermon on the Mount. At first this group was located at Sannerz not far from Schluchtern, where a farm had been rented. Gradually the group became more comunistically inclined until finally a definite step was taken to establish a Christian Communistic Brotherhood, which ultimately found its expression in 1926 in the definite organization of the "Bruderschaft" with the purchase of the

"Bruderhof Neuhof," where they are at present located, not far from Sannerz and Schluchtern.

At first the group knew nothing at all about the Hutterite Brotherhood in the United States and Canada. Accidentally hearing of them, they began to investigate, and found themselves drawn very much to these people. As they received the writing of the Hutterites, and came into personal touch with them through correspondence, especially with Elias Walter of Macleod, Alberta, the fellowship became more and more intimate, and they adapted themselves more and more to the old Hutterite principles and organization. Finally in August, 1928, they made application for acceptance by the Hutterites of Canada as a Hutterite Brotherhood, and in August, 1929, they drew up and adopted a constitution and regulations altogether in the style and spirit of the Hutterite Brotherhood. The story of this acquaintance between the two groups is certainly very remarkable. The leader, Eberhard Arnold, is now on a tour of Hutterite Colonies in the United States and Canada in order to make the union of the two groups complete.

At present there are about seventy persons, adults and children, on the "Bruderhof." Of this number about thirty are members, twenty-five children, and the remainder children or others placed there temporarily for care. This group is strictly organized on the following basis of a fourfold division. (1) **Full**, baptized communicant, **life members**. (2) **Novices**, or applicants for membership, who must undergo a one-year period of testing before being admitted. (3) **Helpers**, who come for a longer or shorter period of time to live on the "Bruderhof," and take part in the life and work of the group, but not as members. (4) **Guests**.

At the head of the Brotherhood is the "Diener am Wort" or elder. Under him is the steward, who is directly responsible for the material side of the Brotherhood, and who was in older times called by the Hutterites, "Diener am Notdurft." As assistant to the steward (Haubshalter) is the matron (Hausmutter). Subject to the steward are two foremen or directors (Arbeitsteiler und Arbeitsordner) who are directly in charge of the work on the "Bruderhof." Every member of the Brotherhood has regularly assigned tasks. At present the following forms of work are conducted in the "Bruderhof:" Writing, publication and lecturing; child-training and school; farming and gardening; carpentry and other crafts such as pottery, smithery, saddlery, sewing and housework, etc. Since the number of members is yet small, a number of the crafts are not yet in operation. The only persons who have to do with money are the five higher officials, and here primarily on the steward, who is in charge of all the business of the Bruderhof, and makes all sales and purchases. When one joins the group he surrenders all his property and becomes a member of the group for life, subject to the discipline of the organization.

Finally it should be said that the Brotherhood has a strong mission spirit and has a definite program of evangelization. First of all, evangelization is to be accomplished through testimony to the many guests who come to the "Bruderhof." In the course of a year the number of guests reaches a thousand or more. Further, all contacts of members of the Brotherhood with the outside world are viewed as evangelistic, not so much through direct propaganda as through the

influence of the life. Another mode of evangelization is through literature. Finally there is the mode of direct teaching and preaching by the "Diener am Wort" in special meetings, lectures and addresses, as the occasion presents itself. This "Aussendung" is conceived quite in the spirit of the older Hutterite Brotherhood.

The history of the old Hutterite Brotherhood is a remarkable one, going all the way back to Switzerland and Tirol, to the time of the Reformation. The Hutterites claim with right a common origin with our own Swiss Mennonite Church in Zurich. In spite of severe persecution, particularly in the time of the Counter reformation, and after the Thirty Years War, 1630-1700, as well as later in the time of Maria Theresa in Austria, they have been able to continue down to the present time, with the maintenance of their historic principles, including a Biblical Christian communism. Almost as remarkable is the story of the rise of the new Hutterite Brotherhood in Germany, without the least connection with the ancient Hutterites. It will be of great interest to watch the future career of this new colony, "Bruderhof-Neuhof."

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